The New Testament as Literature — OVSI Summary

Preamble

Before one even begins to read the New Testament as literature, a prior adjustment must occur: the suspension of a deeply ingrained expectation. Most readers—whether devout, skeptical, or merely curious—approach these texts with the assumption that their primary purpose is to **assert something true**: about God, about history, about salvation. This expectation shapes the act of reading from the outset, orienting attention toward extracting propositions, resolving contradictions, and evaluating claims.

A literary approach begins elsewhere. It asks not first, *«Is this true?»*, but rather, *«What kind of text is this, and how does it work?»* This shift may seem modest, but it transforms the entire field of inquiry. Instead of treating the New Testament as a repository of answers, it becomes an object of **formal and experiential analysis**—a set of writings whose meaning emerges through narrative structure, rhetorical strategy, and reader engagement.

Such an approach requires resisting two opposite tendencies. The first is **devotional reduction**, which flattens the text into a transparent medium for doctrine, overlooking the complexity of its language and form. The second is **skeptical reduction**, which dismisses the text as flawed or inconsistent, failing to account for the ways in which those very tensions may be deliberate or productive. Both approaches share a common assumption: that the value of the text lies in the clarity or correctness of its content. A literary reading challenges this assumption by attending to **how meaning is produced**, not merely what meaning is asserted.

From this perspective, the New Testament reveals itself as a collection of **heterogeneous compositions**. It does not speak with a single voice or adhere to a single genre. Instead, it juxtaposes narratives, letters, and visions, each governed by its own conventions and strategies. The gospels construct portraits rather than biographies; Paul's letters enact persuasion rather than systematization; Revelation stages symbolic drama rather than offering literal prediction. To read these texts literarily is to recognize and respect these differences, allowing each form to shape the mode of interpretation.

At the same time, the New Testament is not simply a loose anthology. Its status as a canon binds these diverse texts into a shared framework, inviting readers to move among them, to compare, contrast, and connect. Meaning arises not only within individual writings but also **between them**, in the spaces of resonance and dissonance that the canon creates. The act of reading thus becomes exploratory rather than definitive, a process of navigating a field of possibilities.

Another crucial element of this approach is the role of the reader. Literary meaning is not fixed within the text but unfolds through interaction. Readers bring their own contexts, assumptions, and questions, which shape how the text is understood. This does not imply that interpretation is arbitrary, but that it is **dynamic**. The same passage can generate different meanings in different situations, not because the text changes, but because its engagement with readers does.

To read the New Testament as literature, then, is not to diminish it but to encounter it more fully. It is to take seriously its complexity, its artistry, and its capacity to affect those who read it. It is to move from seeking final answers to participating in an ongoing process of interpretation—one in which the text continues to speak, not by closing meaning, but by opening it.

Acknowledgments / Preface

Although brief and conventional in form, the acknowledgments of *The New Testament as Literature* offer a revealing glimpse into the intellectual and institutional context from which the book emerges. Rather than functioning merely as a gesture of gratitude, this section subtly situates the work within a **network of scholarly collaboration**, conversation, and academic production.

Keefer begins by thanking individuals associated with **Oxford University Press**, particularly the editor who guided the project to completion. This acknowledgment points to an often-overlooked dimension of scholarly writing: books are not produced in isolation but are shaped through editorial processes that influence structure, clarity, and audience. The presence of a major academic publisher also signals the book's intended role within a broader ecosystem of knowledge dissemination—specifically, the *Very Short Introduction* series, which aims to make complex subjects accessible without sacrificing intellectual rigor.

The author then turns to colleagues from his academic environment, particularly those connected to Emory University. These acknowledgments emphasize the importance of **intellectual community**. Conversations, debates, and shared inquiry form the background against which the book takes shape. Ideas are not simply generated by an individual mind but are refined through interaction with others who challenge, support, and expand one's thinking. The mention of multiple colleagues suggests that the literary approach adopted in the book is not an isolated innovation but part of an ongoing dialogue within biblical studies and literary criticism.

What emerges from this brief section is an implicit argument about the nature of scholarship itself. Just as the New Testament is a collection of texts shaped by multiple voices over time, so too is modern academic work the product of **collective processes**. The author's perspective is informed by a constellation of influences—teachers, peers, editors—whose contributions are acknowledged even if they are not directly visible in the final text.

There is also a methodological resonance between the acknowledgments and the book's central thesis. Keefer emphasizes throughout the work that meaning arises through **interaction**—between texts and readers, between different literary forms, between parts and whole. The acknowledgments mirror this principle at the level of authorship. The book itself becomes a site of interaction, shaped by exchanges that extend beyond the page.

Furthermore, the tone of the acknowledgments reflects the ethos of the *Very Short Introduction* series: clarity, accessibility, and engagement with a broad audience. By situating the book within this series, Keefer signals that his approach to the New Testament is intended not only for specialists but for readers who may be encountering these ideas for the first time. The literary lens is presented as a way of bridging the gap between academic scholarship and general readership, making the text approachable without reducing its complexity.

In this sense, the acknowledgments perform a quiet but significant function. They frame the book as part of a **continuum of interpretation**, linking past scholarship, present inquiry, and future readership. The New Testament itself has been shaped by centuries of interpretation, and Keefer's work enters this ongoing tradition not as a definitive statement but as a contribution to an evolving conversation.

What appears at first as a routine prefatory note thus reveals the conditions under which the book was conceived: collaboration, dialogue, and a commitment to rethinking familiar texts in new ways.

Chapter 1 — Introduction

The New Testament is one of the most widely read and interpreted collections of texts in human history. Composed of twenty-seven writings dating back roughly two millennia, it has shaped not only religious belief but also cultural, ethical, and literary traditions across vast regions of the world. Its readership is extraordinarily diverse: devout Christians approach it as sacred scripture guiding belief and conduct; adherents of other religions read it comparatively; skeptics examine it critically; and secular readers engage it as a cultural artifact. The questions each reader brings inevitably shape the meaning they derive.

Kyle Keefer situates his project within this plurality of perspectives but adopts a deliberately specific lens: the New Testament as literature. This approach shifts attention away from doctrinal truth or historical verification and toward language, narrative craft, rhetorical structure, and readerly experience. Rather than treating the text solely as a vehicle for theological content, a literary reading recognizes that it also entertains, provokes, puzzles, and moves its audience. In this sense, the New Testament functions not just as a repository of ideas but as an artistic composition whose form is inseparable from its meaning.

Keefer highlights an ambiguity embedded in the phrase "the Bible as literature." On one hand, it can mean analyzing the Bible using standard literary tools—examining plot, characterization, syntax, and rhetoric. On the other hand, it can imply situating the Bible within the broader literary canon, evaluating its function alongside other works traditionally classified as literature. These two senses—content and function—frame the inquiry of the book, with the first chapter focusing primarily on literary features and the second expanding into canonical questions.

Historically, however, the New Testament was not regarded as "literature" in the aesthetic sense. Early Christian readers often distinguished it sharply from classical literary works. Augustine's reflections provide a revealing case: while deeply moved by philosophical writings like those of Cicero, he initially found the style of the Bible comparatively plain, even unimpressive. Though he later recognized its depth and difficulty, he maintained a distinction between its humble language and the refined elegance of classical prose.

This early valuation contributed to a long-standing tendency within Christianity to privilege content over form. Theological meaning was elevated, while stylistic features were minimized or ignored. As a result, the literary artistry of the New Testament was historically underappreciated. Only much later—especially with the rise of vernacular translations such as the King James Bible and the development of modern literary criticism—did readers begin to attend more carefully to the text's formal qualities. Twentieth-century scholarship, in particular, recognized that the New Testament writers exercised far greater rhetorical and narrative skill than previously acknowledged.

A literary approach also offers a corrective to the dominance of historical-critical methods that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those approaches sought to reconstruct the historical context behind the text, often treating it as evidence for past events rather than as a crafted narrative. While valuable, this method could alienate readers by prioritizing scholarly reconstruction over direct engagement with the text itself. Literary criticism, by contrast, emphasizes the interaction between text and reader, allowing for a more immediate and experiential mode of understanding.

Keefer illustrates the power of literary analysis through the example of the Good Samaritan. Common interpretations reduce the story to a simple moral lesson about kindness. Yet a closer reading reveals structural and rhetorical complexities. The dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer reframes the central question: instead of defining who qualifies as a "neighbor," the narrative shifts toward identifying who acts as one. The ambiguity of Jesus' final command—"Go and do likewise"—further complicates the interpretation, suggesting that the reader may be called to occupy

multiple roles simultaneously. This layered reading demonstrates how attention to narrative form deepens meaning beyond conventional moral summaries.

Such examples underscore a central claim: the New Testament's language cannot be treated merely as a transparent vessel for ideas. Its meaning emerges through the interplay of structure, rhetoric, and reader response. To focus exclusively on doctrinal content is to miss the richness generated by this interplay. Literary reading, therefore, does not discard theological concerns but reframes them, showing how meaning is produced through form.

Finally, Keefer addresses the issue of translation. Since most modern readers encounter the New Testament in translation rather than in its original Greek, any literary analysis must acknowledge the distortions and limitations this entails. Nevertheless, patterns of narrative, imagery, and rhetorical structure remain accessible across translations, allowing for meaningful literary engagement even without knowledge of the original language.

The chapter concludes by outlining the trajectory of the book: subsequent chapters will examine the major components of the New Testament—the gospels, Pauline letters, and Revelation—as distinct literary forms, before returning to consider the collection as a whole. Whether read as a unified work or a compilation of diverse texts, the New Testament presents a rich field for literary exploration, one that reveals its complexity, plurality, and enduring power to shape interpretation.

Chapter 2 — The New Testament and the Literary Canon

Chapter 2 confronts a deceptively simple but foundational question: **what counts as literature?** The title of the book itself forces this inquiry, since calling the New Testament "literature" challenges conventional assumptions about both categories—"literature" and "scripture." Keefer begins by dismantling the intuitive but limited definition many readers hold: that literature consists of refined, aesthetically superior works such as canonical novels, poems, or plays studied in formal education.

This traditional definition quickly proves inadequate when applied to the New Testament. By the standards often associated with literary excellence—stylistic polish, complexity of language, or self-conscious artistry—the New Testament may appear deficient. Its prose can seem uneven, its narratives episodic, and its authors did not conceive of themselves as literary artists in the classical sense. Comparing, for instance, the Gospel of Matthew with a novel like *Moby-Dick* highlights this perceived disparity.

Yet Keefer argues that the problem lies not with the New Testament but with the restrictive definition of literature itself.

To move beyond this limitation, Keefer adopts a functional definition inspired by literary critic Kenneth Burke: literature should be understood in terms of **what it does for its readers**, not what intrinsic qualities it possesses. Burke's formulation—"literature as equipment for living"—reorients the discussion toward use, effect, and social function. Literature, in this sense, provides strategies for navigating life: interpreting situations, managing emotions, framing conflicts, and shaping responses.

Under this definition, the New Testament fits squarely within the domain of literature. Its stories, parables, and rhetorical forms have long functioned as interpretive tools for individuals and communities. Expressions such as calling a traitor a "Judas" or invoking apocalyptic imagery in times of crisis demonstrate how deeply embedded these texts are in cultural consciousness. The New Testament operates as a shared symbolic reservoir—a "cultural thesaurus"—that informs language, thought, and behavior across contexts, often independently of explicit religious belief.

Keefer then turns to the concept of the **canon**, a term that originally meant a measuring rod but came to denote a collection of authoritative texts. The formation of the New Testament canon was neither instantaneous nor purely top-down. Instead, it emerged through a complex interplay of grassroots reception and institutional recognition. Early Christian communities circulated numerous writings, but certain texts—especially the four gospels and Paul's letters—gained widespread acceptance due to their perceived authority and usefulness.

By the fourth century, figures such as Athanasius articulated lists of canonical books that closely resemble the present New Testament. However, these declarations did not impose authority so much as formalize an already existing consensus. The canon thus reflects both **organic processes ("bottom-up")**—the popularity and utility of certain texts—and **institutional decisions ("top-down")**—criteria such as apostolic authorship and doctrinal consistency.

Importantly, the inclusion or exclusion of texts was not solely a matter of theological correctness but also of **pragmatic function**. Texts that proved meaningful, engaging, and adaptable to the needs of communities were more likely to be preserved and canonized. In this sense, the canon itself can be understood as the outcome of literary selection: a recognition of which writings effectively served as "equipment for living." This perspective undermines the idea that authority alone determines literary status; readers play an active role in shaping what endures.

Keefer further explores how the New Testament operates within the broader landscape of Western literature. Its influence extends far beyond religious contexts, permeating works from explicitly Christian texts like *Paradise Lost* to more secular or indirect engagements such as Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* or Joyce's *Ulysses*. In these cases, the New Testament provides not just thematic material but a shared symbolic framework that authors can appropriate, reinterpret, and transform.

The discussion of Dante's *Divine Comedy* offers a particularly illuminating example. Dante integrates biblical figures alongside historical and mythological characters, treating them all as elements within a unified literary universe. This approach collapses distinctions between fact and fiction, suggesting that the value of the New Testament lies not in its historical verifiability but in its narrative and symbolic power. For Dante, the New Testament becomes a resource for imaginative construction—a set of stories through which reality can be interpreted and reshaped.

Similarly, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* demonstrates how characters within literature can themselves engage with the New Testament as a literary text. The Wife of Bath, for example, cites biblical material to justify her personal experiences and worldview. Her use of scripture is selective, interpretive, and rhetorically strategic, illustrating how readers actively "think with" the New Testament rather than passively receiving its meanings.

These examples reinforce a central insight: reading the New Testament as literature aligns with how it has historically been used. Authors and readers alike treat its stories as flexible tools for interpretation, capable of generating meaning across diverse contexts. The boundary between sacred text and literary artifact thus becomes porous, if not irrelevant.

Ultimately, Chapter 2 reframes the New Testament not as an anomalous or marginal case within literary studies but as a paradigmatic example of literature understood functionally. Its enduring power lies in its capacity to shape perception, language, and response—to serve, in Burke's terms, as a guide for living. By shifting the focus from intrinsic qualities to lived effects, Keefer opens the way for a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of literature itself, one in which the New Testament occupies a central and indispensable place.

Chapter 3 — The Gospels

Chapter 3 turns to the first major literary unit of the New Testament: the **gospels**. Keefer begins by confronting a fundamental mismatch between modern expectations and

ancient narrative forms. Contemporary readers often approach the gospels as biographies in the modern sense—expecting chronological coherence, psychological depth, and factual completeness. The gospels, however, consistently frustrate these expectations. They provide almost no information about Jesus' physical appearance, offer minimal insight into his childhood, and avoid probing his inner psychological state.

This apparent lack is not a deficiency but a feature of their genre. Keefer situates the gospels within the tradition of **ancient biography (bios)**, a form that differs significantly from modern historiography. Ancient biographers such as Plutarch or Suetonius did not aim at objective, comprehensive accounts; instead, they crafted narratives designed to convey a particular interpretation of their subject. Selection, arrangement, and rhetorical emphasis were guided by thematic and moral purposes rather than strict chronology or factual completeness. In this sense, the gospel writers function less as journalists and more as literary composers.

Understanding the gospels as literary compositions requires recognizing the **active role of the authors**. They are not passive transmitters of tradition but deliberate arrangers of material. Each gospel constructs its own version of Jesus by selecting episodes, organizing them in distinctive ways, and shaping the narrative through stylistic choices. Even if the authors relied on earlier sources—both oral and written—the final product reflects intentional design. The gospels are thus best understood as crafted narratives that present interpretive portraits rather than neutral records.

Keefer also introduces several widely accepted scholarly assumptions that, while historical in nature, inform literary reading. The gospels were written several decades after Jesus' death, likely between 65 and 95 CE; they were originally anonymous; their authors were not eyewitnesses; and they depended on prior sources. These points underscore that the gospels are mediated texts, shaped by communities and traditions rather than direct reportage. However, Keefer deliberately limits the role of historical inquiry, arguing that excessive focus on origins can distract from appreciating the texts as literary artifacts.

From a literary perspective, what matters is **how the narratives function**, not whether they correspond exactly to historical events. The gospel writers construct meaning through narrative techniques—juxtaposition, repetition, dialogue, and thematic development. For example, episodes are often arranged to highlight particular aspects of Jesus' identity or mission. Miracles, teachings, and conflicts are not merely recorded but strategically positioned to shape the reader's understanding.

One key feature of the gospels is their **selectivity**. They do not attempt to provide exhaustive coverage of Jesus' life; instead, they present a curated set of stories that

serve specific interpretive aims. This selectivity creates a kind of narrative density: each episode carries disproportionate weight, contributing to the overall portrayal of Jesus. The absence of certain details—such as physical description—directs attention toward actions and words rather than external appearance, reinforcing the thematic focus of the narratives.

Another important aspect is the **lack of psychological interiority**. Unlike modern novels, the gospels rarely depict the inner thoughts or motivations of characters. This does not indicate narrative simplicity but rather reflects a different storytelling strategy. Characters are defined primarily through speech and action, inviting readers to infer meaning rather than being told explicitly. This approach can create a sense of ambiguity and openness, allowing multiple interpretations to coexist.

Keefer emphasizes that the gospels are **rhetorical works**. Their purpose is not merely to inform but to persuade. Each narrative seeks to convince its audience of a particular vision of Jesus—his authority, identity, and significance. This persuasive dimension shapes every aspect of the text, from the selection of material to the arrangement of scenes. The gospels are thus deeply intentional constructions, designed to produce specific responses in their readers.

The diversity among the four gospels further underscores their literary nature. Although they share certain stories and themes, each presents a distinct perspective. Differences in structure, emphasis, and tone reveal that there is no single, unified narrative but rather multiple interpretive voices. This plurality is not a problem to be resolved but a feature to be appreciated. Reading the gospels side by side highlights how narrative choices shape meaning, encouraging readers to engage actively with the text.

Keefer also points out that attempts to harmonize the gospels into a single, coherent account can obscure their literary richness. Treating them as complementary pieces of a unified biography risks flattening their differences and ignoring the unique contributions of each narrative. A literary approach, by contrast, preserves these differences and explores how they generate meaning.

Ultimately, Chapter 3 invites readers to reconsider what kind of texts the gospels are. They are not deficient biographies but sophisticated narrative compositions that employ the conventions of ancient literature to construct compelling portrayals of Jesus. By focusing on narrative form, rhetorical strategy, and reader engagement, Keefer demonstrates that the gospels reward close literary analysis.

Reading them as literature reveals not only their artistry but also their capacity to shape interpretation in complex and enduring ways.

Chapter 4 — Paul and His Letters

Chapter 4 shifts from narrative to a markedly different literary form: the **epistles**, focusing especially on the letters attributed to Paul. Keefer begins by noting a striking fact that often goes unnoticed: the majority of the New Testament is not narrative at all but **correspondence**. Out of the twenty-seven books, at least twenty take the form of letters, meaning that readers of the New Testament are, in effect, reading other people's mail—texts originally addressed to specific communities or individuals.

This shift in genre fundamentally alters the mode of reading. Unlike the gospels, which present stories about Jesus, the letters confront the reader with **direct discourse**—arguments, exhortations, instructions, and reflections. They lack plot, character development, and dramatic progression in the conventional sense. Yet Keefer insists that this absence does not make them any less literary. Instead, it requires a different set of analytical tools, centered on rhetoric, voice, and persuasion.

To understand the literary character of these letters, Keefer situates them within the broader tradition of **ancient epistolary writing**. In contrast to modern emails or brief messages, letters in antiquity were often carefully crafted documents. Writers could consult manuals on letter composition, and many letters were composed with the expectation that they might circulate beyond their original recipients. As a result, the boundary between private and public writing was often blurred. Historical examples—from the correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to the letters of John Keats—demonstrate that letters can achieve lasting literary significance.

Within this context, Paul emerges as a **master practitioner of the epistolary form**. His letters are not casual communications but deliberate rhetorical acts. They aim to persuade audiences, address specific problems, and shape the beliefs and behaviors of early Christian communities. Keefer cautions against reading Paul primarily as a systematic theologian. While his writings have profoundly influenced Christian doctrine, they were not composed as abstract treatises. Instead, they are situational documents, responding to concrete circumstances with urgency and creativity.

A literary approach to Paul, therefore, focuses on **how he argues**, not just what he argues. His letters are rich in rhetorical strategies: appeals to authority, emotional exhortation, metaphorical language, and carefully structured arguments. He constructs persuasive narratives within his letters, often reinterpreting events or concepts to support his position. For example, his use of terms such as "grace," "faith," "justification," and "redemption" has had a lasting impact on language itself, demonstrating the linguistic power of his writing.

Keefer also emphasizes the importance of **persona** in letter writing. When composing a letter, an author creates a version of himself tailored to the audience and purpose. Paul's letters exhibit this dynamic vividly. In each letter, he presents himself differently—sometimes as an authoritative apostle, sometimes as a concerned pastor, sometimes as a vulnerable individual. At the same time, he constructs his audience rhetorically, imagining their attitudes, needs, and potential objections. This dual construction of sender and receiver is central to understanding the literary dynamics of the epistles.

The diversity within the Pauline corpus further highlights its literary complexity. Not all letters attributed to Paul are universally accepted as authentic, and even among those that are, there is significant variation in style, tone, and content. Some letters, like Romans or 1 Corinthians, present dense and elaborate arguments, while others, such as Philemon, are brief and personal. This variation reflects the adaptability of the epistolary form and Paul's skill in tailoring his message to different contexts.

Keefer underscores that the letters are **inherently dialogical**, even though only one side of the conversation is preserved. Readers must infer the circumstances that prompted each letter—the questions, conflicts, or misunderstandings that Paul addresses. This indirectness adds a layer of interpretive complexity, as the reader reconstructs the implied context from the text itself. The letters thus engage readers in an active process of interpretation, requiring them to piece together the situation behind the words.

Another key feature of the epistles is their **propositional nature**. Unlike the narrative mode of the gospels, which conveys meaning through story, the letters often present explicit claims and instructions. They exhort readers to adopt certain behaviors, embrace particular beliefs, and align themselves with specific communal norms. Yet even these seemingly straightforward directives are embedded within rhetorical frameworks that shape how they are received.

Keefer also addresses the tension between **historical and literary approaches**. While historical questions—such as authorship or chronology—are important, a purely historical reading can obscure the rhetorical artistry of the letters. A literary approach, by contrast, foregrounds the persuasive strategies and linguistic features that give the texts their enduring power. It allows readers to see Paul not merely as a historical figure or theological authority but as a skilled communicator shaping his message for maximum impact.

Ultimately, Chapter 4 reframes the Pauline letters as dynamic works of literature. They are not static repositories of doctrine but living texts, crafted with intention and sensitivity to audience. Their power lies in their ability to engage, persuade, and transform readers through language.

By attending to their rhetorical and literary dimensions, readers can appreciate the creativity and complexity of Paul's writing, as well as its profound influence on Western thought and expression.

Chapter 5 — Revelation

Chapter 5 examines the final and most stylistically distinctive book of the New Testament: **Revelation**. Unlike the gospels or the Pauline letters, Revelation belongs to the genre of **apocalyptic literature**, a form characterized by vivid imagery, symbolic language, and a focus on cosmic conflict and ultimate transformation. Keefer approaches this text not as a coded prediction of future events—as it is often popularly read—but as a **literary composition** whose meaning emerges through its imagery, structure, and rhetorical force.

One of the first challenges Revelation poses is its **strangeness**. Filled with beasts, angels, catastrophes, and surreal visions, it resists straightforward interpretation. Readers frequently attempt to decode its symbols as if they correspond directly to historical or future events. Keefer argues that such readings, while common, tend to reduce the text's richness. A literary approach instead treats its imagery as symbolic and evocative, designed to produce emotional and imaginative responses rather than precise predictions.

Revelation is deeply rooted in the **apocalyptic tradition**, which uses visionary narratives to articulate a worldview in which earthly events are part of a larger cosmic drama. This genre typically reveals hidden truths about the structure of reality, portraying a struggle between forces of good and evil that culminates in divine judgment and renewal. In Revelation, this cosmic perspective reframes the experiences of its original audience, offering a way to interpret suffering and oppression within a larger narrative of ultimate justice.

Keefer emphasizes that Revelation is a **highly structured work**, despite its apparent chaos. Its sequences of visions—cycles of seals, trumpets, and bowls—are arranged in patterns that create rhythm and escalation. These repetitions are not redundant but intensify the narrative, building a sense of mounting tension. The text's structure guides the reader through a series of increasingly dramatic scenes, culminating in the final vision of a renewed world.

The imagery of Revelation is not arbitrary but draws heavily on earlier biblical texts, especially the Hebrew Bible. This intertextuality creates a dense network of references that enrich the meaning of its symbols. However, Keefer cautions against trying to map

each image onto a single, fixed meaning. The power of the imagery lies in its **multiplicity**—its ability to evoke a range of associations and interpretations.

A central feature of Revelation is its use of **visual language**. The text operates almost like a sequence of tableaux, inviting readers to imagine scenes rather than simply process propositions. This visual quality aligns with Keefer's broader argument that the New Testament can be read not only temporally (like music unfolding in time) but also spatially (like a painting that can be viewed from different angles). Revelation, in particular, lends itself to this spatial mode of reading, as its images can be contemplated individually or as part of a larger композition.

The figure of **John**, the seer, functions as both narrator and participant. His visionary experience provides the framework for the text, but his role is less that of a detached observer and more that of a mediator between the divine and the audience. Through his perspective, readers are drawn into the unfolding drama, experiencing the visions as if they themselves were witnessing them.

Revelation is also intensely **rhetorical**. It seeks to persuade its audience to adopt a particular stance toward their present circumstances. Written in a context of persecution or marginalization, it offers a powerful reinterpretation of reality: what appears as weakness or defeat is recast as part of a larger divine plan. The text encourages endurance, faithfulness, and resistance, using its dramatic imagery to reinforce these themes.

Keefer highlights how Revelation has functioned historically as **"equipment for living."** Its apocalyptic imagery has been repeatedly invoked in times of crisis, from plagues to wars, providing a framework for understanding catastrophic events. This adaptability demonstrates its literary power: the text's symbols are flexible enough to be reinterpreted across different contexts, allowing readers to project their own situations onto its narrative.

At the same time, this flexibility has led to **misreadings** that treat Revelation as a literal blueprint of the future. Keefer argues that such interpretations overlook the text's literary nature, reducing its symbolic richness to a set of fixed correspondences. A literary reading, by contrast, preserves ambiguity and recognizes that meaning emerges through engagement with the text rather than through decoding it.

Another key aspect of Revelation is its **integration of genres**. While primarily apocalyptic, it also incorporates elements of prophecy and epistle. The opening chapters, for instance, contain letters to specific communities, grounding the text in

concrete historical situations. This blending of forms reinforces the idea that the New Testament is not a homogeneous collection but a diverse assemblage of literary types.

Ultimately, Keefer presents Revelation as a work that **demands imaginative participation**. It does not offer a single, clear message but invites readers into a complex symbolic world. Its meaning is not something to be extracted once and for all but something that unfolds through repeated reading and interpretation.

By approaching Revelation as literature, readers can move beyond reductive interpretations and appreciate its artistry, its emotional intensity, and its capacity to shape how people understand their world. The text's enduring impact lies not in its predictive accuracy but in its ability to transform perception—turning chaos into narrative, suffering into meaning, and uncertainty into vision.

Chapter 6 — The New Testament, Bound

In the final chapter, Keefer steps back from individual genres—the gospels, the letters, and Revelation—to consider the New Testament **as a whole**. The central question shifts: not how each text functions independently, but how this diverse collection operates when **bound together into a canon**.

At first glance, the New Testament appears unified: a single book, often printed under one cover, commonly read as a coherent whole. Yet this unity is, in many ways, an **imposed illusion**. The texts differ radically in genre, tone, purpose, and perspective. Narratives of Jesus' life sit alongside personal letters, theological arguments, and apocalyptic visions. Rather than smoothing over these differences, Keefer emphasizes that the canon preserves **plurality**—a multiplicity of voices that resist total harmonization.

This tension between **unity and diversity** is one of the defining literary features of the New Testament. On the one hand, readers have long treated it as a single story, tracing a trajectory from the life of Jesus to the spread of early Christianity and culminating in cosmic resolution. On the other hand, each text maintains its own integrity, offering distinct and sometimes conflicting viewpoints. A literary reading does not attempt to resolve these tensions but instead explores how they generate meaning.

Keefer proposes that reading the New Testament as a whole involves holding together two seemingly incompatible perspectives: **singularity and multiplicity**. The canon invites readers to see connections across texts—to link themes, motifs, and ideas—while also recognizing the independence of each component. This duality creates a dynamic

reading experience, where coherence emerges not from uniformity but from interaction among diverse elements.

To conceptualize this experience, Keefer introduces two complementary models of reading: **temporal and spatial**. A first reading of the New Testament is necessarily temporal, unfolding sequentially like music. The reader moves from one text to the next, unable to anticipate what lies ahead. Meaning develops progressively, shaped by the order of reading.

However, once the entire collection has been read, a second mode becomes possible: a **spatial or visual** model. The New Testament can then be approached like a painting, where the reader can move freely among its parts, making connections across different texts. This shift allows for a more complex form of understanding, as the reader is no longer bound by linear progression but can perceive the work as an interconnected whole.

Keefer extends this idea through the metaphor of a **photographic mosaic**. Just as a mosaic is composed of many individual images that retain their distinctiveness while contributing to a larger picture, the New Testament consists of discrete writings that together form a composite work. Up close, each text stands on its own; from a distance, patterns and relationships emerge. This metaphor captures both the fragmentation and the coherence of the canon, illustrating how meaning arises from the interplay of parts and whole.

Importantly, the canon does not dictate a single way of reading. Readers often move non-linearly through the New Testament, jumping between texts and drawing connections based on thematic or conceptual affinities. A passage in one gospel might prompt reference to another gospel, a letter of Paul, or even Revelation. This **intertextual movement** is not a deviation from proper reading but an inherent feature of how the canon functions.

Keefer also emphasizes that the act of canonization itself is a **literary decision**. By selecting certain texts and excluding others, early Christian communities shaped not only the theological boundaries of their tradition but also its literary contours. The canon reflects choices about which voices to preserve and how they should be arranged. These decisions continue to influence how readers experience the New Testament, guiding interpretation through the structure of the collection.

At the same time, the canon remains open to reinterpretation. Readers bring their own perspectives, questions, and contexts to the text, creating new connections and meanings. The New Testament is not a static object but a **dynamic field of**

interpretation, continually reshaped by its readers. This aligns with Keefer's broader definition of literature as something that functions in the lives of its audience.

One of the most significant implications of this approach is that the New Testament can be read meaningfully **without presupposing religious belief**. While it remains a sacred text for many, its literary qualities allow it to engage a broader audience. As a collection of narratives, arguments, and visions, it offers insights into human experience, cultural formation, and the construction of meaning. Its status as literature does not diminish its religious significance but expands its accessibility.

Ultimately, Chapter 6 presents the New Testament as a **complex, multivocal work** that resists simplification. Its power lies not in a single, unified message but in the richness that emerges from its diversity. By reading it as a bound collection—one that simultaneously unifies and differentiates—readers can appreciate the depth and complexity of its literary design.

The New Testament, in this view, is not merely a compilation of texts but a **carefully constructed mosaic of meaning**, inviting readers to navigate its tensions, explore its connections, and participate in its ongoing interpretation.

Coda

To read the New Testament as literature is to shift the center of gravity from **truth-claims to meaning-making**, from doctrine to form, from authority to experience. Across its chapters, Keefer has dismantled a long-standing habit: the reduction of these texts to vessels of theology whose language is merely incidental. What emerges instead is a far more dynamic object—one that lives not only in what it says, but in how it says it and in what it does to those who encounter it.

This shift is not trivial. For centuries, readers approached the New Testament under the assumption that its primary function was to reveal divine truth. Interpretation, therefore, was oriented toward extraction: identifying correct beliefs, resolving contradictions, and securing doctrinal coherence. In this framework, literary features—ambiguity, narrative structure, rhetorical tension—often appeared as obstacles to clarity. Keefer's project reverses this orientation. What had been treated as noise becomes signal.

A literary reading reveals that the New Testament is not a single voice but a **chorus**. The gospels present multiple, irreducible portraits of Jesus; Paul's letters construct situational arguments shaped by specific audiences; Revelation explodes into symbolic excess that resists stabilization. These are not defects to be harmonized but conditions that

generate meaning. The text's plurality is not something to overcome—it is the very medium through which it speaks.

Equally important is the recognition that meaning does not reside solely in the text. It emerges in the **interaction between text and reader**. This is why the same parable can yield radically different interpretations, or why Revelation can function as both a source of terror and of consolation. The New Testament operates less like a code to be deciphered and more like a set of **interpretive instruments**—tools that readers use to navigate their own realities.

Here the concept of "equipment for living" becomes decisive. The New Testament endures not because of a fixed set of meanings but because of its **adaptability**. Its stories, metaphors, and rhetorical forms can be reactivated in new contexts, generating fresh interpretations without exhausting their possibilities. This capacity explains its pervasive influence on language, culture, and imagination. It is not simply read; it is **used**.

The canon itself reflects this dynamic. It is not a neutral container but a structured field that invites certain kinds of reading. By binding diverse texts together, it creates a space in which unity and difference coexist. Readers are encouraged to move between parts, to draw connections, to construct coherence without erasing tension. The New Testament, as a whole, becomes less a linear narrative and more a **network of relations**.

What, then, does it mean to read the New Testament as literature? It means relinquishing the expectation of a single, stable meaning and embracing a mode of reading that is attentive to ambiguity, form, and effect. It means recognizing that the power of these texts lies not in their capacity to settle questions but in their ability to **generate them**—to provoke, unsettle, and reconfigure understanding.

Such a reading does not negate religious engagement; it reframes it. Faith, doubt, critique, and appreciation can all coexist within a literary approach. The New Testament becomes accessible not only as sacred scripture but as a profound human artifact—one that continues to shape how individuals and communities imagine the world.

What remains is not a conclusion but an opening: a recognition that the New Testament is less a closed system than an **ongoing event of interpretation**, renewed each time it is read.